

## Failure Bias in Air Advisory Missions

### Description

The Air Force recently [announced](#) plans to shutter its mobility support advisory squadrons and divest other international training capabilities, following Air Force Special Operations Command's [deactivation](#) of its advisory squadrons in 2022. Officials say they are redirecting resources from "nonlethal programs" toward new weapons systems. Yet this decision reflects a limited understanding of how lethal air advisory missions have been and can be to America's enemies and how investment in such capabilities could advance the administration's goal of [rebalancing](#) defense burden-sharing among America's allies and partners. It also continues a long-standing pattern of failure bias by Air Force decision-makers: judging advisory operations by a few high-profile defeats while ignoring many quiet successes. Divesting air advisory capabilities thus overlooks their historical effectiveness and potential to advance U.S. strategic objectives, while repeating the mistake of failure bias that has shaped Air Force decision-making since Vietnam.

### Vietnam and the Turn Against Advising

Increased skepticism toward air advisory missions after America's withdrawal from Afghanistan echoes a similar reaction following Vietnam. Amid mounting public war weariness, Congress passed the 1971 Foreign Assistance Act, [declaring](#): "Our Vietnam experience teaches that the first fatal step toward direct involvement comes with the furnishing of United States advisers to the military and related forces of another country." After the fall of Saigon in 1975, critics questioned why South Vietnam's air force—built with U.S. equipment and training into the fourth largest in the world—failed to stop the communist offensive. In response, the Air Force [closed](#) nearly 90 percent of its special operations squadrons, retaining only a few gunships, mobility aircraft, and helicopters, and eliminating advisors altogether.

### Quiet Successes: Advisory Wins in the Philippines, Taiwan, and Thailand

The conclusion that advisory missions were ineffective and inevitably led to direct U.S. involvement ignored substantial evidence to the contrary. Across Southeast Asia, several quiet successes stood in sharp contrast to the dramatic failure of the Second Indochina War. The Philippine Air Force helped Manila [defeat the communist Huk rebels](#) in the early 1950s. In 1958, the Nationalist Chinese air force prevailed over its Communist adversary in the [Taiwan Strait](#). The Royal Thai Air Force helped contain

a virulent insurgency from 1965 to 1984. In each case, American equipment and air advisors played a decisive role in securing partner military victories, ensuring the survival of allied governments, and advancing U.S. strategic objectives by stemming the tide of communist expansion in the Indo-Pacific.

The successes in Taiwan, Thailand, and the Philippines went largely unnoticed in Washington and among the American public because they required no large-scale U.S. intervention. As Sun Tzu [observed](#), “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.” From America’s perspective, this was exactly what happened: allied forces did the fighting while the United States remained on the sidelines, safeguarding American lives and reducing the risk that direct U.S. involvement would escalate local conflicts into regional or even global wars.

The temptation to intervene directly in all three cases weighed heavily on American leaders. In 1950, a joint State and Defense Department analysis recommended sending a reinforced division of U.S. combat troops to the Philippines. Maj Gen Leland Hobbs, chief of the Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group (JUSMAG), counseled against it, [saying](#):

“Such a force is not required for the defense of U.S. bases, and that U.S. troops should not be used to fight Filipinos. The Huks must be defeated by Filipino troops, not by U.S. troops in this sovereign country.”

During the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958, Chief of Naval Operations ADM Arleigh Burke advised President Eisenhower that keeping Taiwan out of Communist hands would require [nuclear strikes](#) on Chinese airfields. Eisenhower rejected this advice, relying instead on the Nationalists to hold the line with American logistical, training, and advisory support—avoiding a potentially catastrophic escalation. In Thailand, Ambassador Graham Martin [similarly argued](#) against deploying U.S. combat forces. Citing the military’s mishandling of South Vietnam, he limited America’s role to training, advising, and equipping Thai forces.

## **From Dependence to Durability: Contrasting Advisory Outcomes Abroad**

It is difficult to quantify a negative, to estimate the cost of a war never fought. This mirrors the [“prevention versus treatment”](#) bias in healthcare. People recognize that prevention is more effective and cost-efficient, yet they often value the treatment of acute problems more. In other words, Americans often prefer outcomes that are easily measured, even if they are worse, over those they intuitively know are effective but harder to quantify.

While the Taiwan, Thailand, and Philippine examples demonstrate successful air advisory missions, it is problematic to even characterize the wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan as primarily advisory operations. Few Americans deployed to Vietnam in the late 1960s would have called it anything other than an American war, and most deployed to Afghanistan would not have seen it as primarily a local effort—especially in terms of airpower. Advisory efforts during these two large U.S. interventions did not aim to build self-sufficient partner air forces. Instead, they produced American auxiliaries entirely dependent on U.S. equipment, logistics, tactics, and funding. The Air Force postponed planning for the South Vietnamese air force’s self-sufficiency until 1973. By then, U.S. forces had withdrawn, and Congress began cutting aid programs. With funding dwindling, the South Vietnamese [could not maintain](#) their aircraft and ran out of munitions. Much of the world’s fourth-largest air force sat impotent on the ground as North Vietnamese forces surged across the border.

Similarly, the United States built an Afghan Air Force in its own image, equipping it with advanced aircraft and precision weapons and training the Afghan Army to rely on overwhelming airpower. However, U.S. advisors never expected it to become self-sufficient. “CLS (contract logistics support) for life” became a mantra early on, and contractors were hired to maintain aircraft. Like South Vietnam, the Afghan Air Force never became self-sufficient in its local context, and by 2014, Congress began limiting sustainment funding. Amid Taliban gains following the American withdrawal, the Afghan Air Force ran out of precision munitions, [contractors withdrew](#), and the Afghans could not repair or arm the remaining aircraft. An army dependent on precision close air support rapidly collapsed when that support disappeared.

By contrast, the United States built the air forces of Taiwan, Thailand, and the Philippines with long-term self-sufficiency as an explicit goal. Advisors devoted as much—or more—effort to developing support functions as to building tactical capabilities. At every step, they considered what the allied military, society, and economy could sustain. As a result, all three air forces became durable institutions that continue to operate today.

In fact, the Philippine Air Force proved to be one of the [quiet victories](#) of the Global War on Terrorism. When the Abu Sayyaf Group pledged allegiance to al Qaeda and increased attacks on U.S. and Philippine interests, it threatened to escalate a longstanding low-level insurgency in the southern Philippines into an international jihad. Yet Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines barely registered with the American public because it avoided direct U.S. intervention, instead enabling Filipinos to fight their own battles. As a personal example, I deployed to the Philippines in 2013 to fill a gap in the Philippine Air Force’s tactical intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. By the time I returned as a combat aviation advisor several years later, I had the opportunity to work with the Filipinos’ own ISR and light attack platforms. Over time, they had leveraged U.S. support to build sustainable capabilities, and counterterrorism operations never escalated beyond a local conflict.

For the United States, this approach not only proved operationally effective and cost-sustainable, but it also built relationships over time that generated long-term institutional influence.

## **Conclusion: Overcoming Failure Bias**

Failure bias has prevented the U.S. Air Force from identifying the factors that distinguish successful advisory missions from unsuccessful ones. It has also disregarded the lethality of partner-led, U.S.-supported successes that advanced American national interests in strategically important regions. At the same time, direct conventional interventions have escaped scrutiny and accountability by scapegoating marginalized advising efforts. Far from mere generosity, air advisory missions have enhanced partners' effectiveness and lethality while protecting the lives of American servicemembers. It is time to recognize these quiet successes and invest in a prevention strategy that works.

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*Main Image: A U.S. Air Force munitions specialist supervises a Nationalist Chinese technician mounting an AIM-9 Sidewinder missile on an F-86F jet during the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, 1958. This marked history's first combat use of guided air-to-air missiles, the culmination of a years-long U.S. Air Force and Navy training and advisory effort. (Courtesy of the National Archives)*

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